

Lunch Meal Pattern

Overview

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) is a federally funded, state administered, nonprofit meal program operating in public and nonprofit private schools and residential child care institutions. The NSLP provides nutritionally balanced, low-cost or free lunches to children each school day. The program was established under the National School Lunch Act, signed by President Harry Truman in 1946. School districts and independent schools that choose to take part in the NSLP receive reimbursement from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), through their State agency (SA) for each meal they serve. In return, participating School Food Authorities (SFAs) must serve lunches that meet Federal meal pattern requirements, and they must offer free or reduced price lunches to eligible children. The meal pattern and nutrition standards are based on the latest *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, though decisions about specific foods items to serve and how to prepare food are made by local SFAs.

Terminology

Food component (aka meal component) - One of the required food groups that comprise a USDA reimbursable meal: meat/meat alternate; grain; fruit; vegetable; and fluid milk. Schools must offer the specified food components in at least the minimum required quantities. The menu planner decides how to count (credit) certain foods that have more than one component option (e.g., legumes may count as either a meat/meat alternate or as a vegetable).

Offer versus serve (OVS) - A menu planning and meal service concept that allows students to decline some of the food offered in a reimbursable lunch or breakfast in order to permit students to choose the foods they want, while reducing food waste. OVS is optional at lunch for grades K-5 and 6-8, but is required for senior high school grades 9-12. For further information, see the Offer Versus Serve section in the Reference Guide or see the OVS link listed under Additional Resources.

Ounce equivalent (oz eq) – The amount of food counted as equal to one grain component when crediting grain or one meat/meat alternate component when crediting meat/meat alternate in the NSLP.

Point-of-service (POS) - Food service operation point where determination of a reimbursable meal served to free, reduced-price, or paid lunch eligible students is made.

Reimbursable meal - A meal that has met all of the mandatory federal meal component requirements and can be claimed to receive reimbursement.

Vegetable subgroup – A subgroup of vegetable that falls within the following five categories: dark green, red/orange, beans or peas, starchy, or other. Each of these subgroups must be offered on every line over the course of the week.

Whole grain-rich (WGR) – Whole grain-rich products must contain at least 50-percent whole-grains, and the remaining grain, if any, must be enriched. To qualify as WGR, the item must: meet portion size requirements for the grains component; have at least 50 percent of the grains in the product as whole grains; have all the grains in the product be whole or enriched; have whole grain as the primary ingredient by weight (non-mixed dishes) or as the primary *grain* ingredient by weight (mixed dishes). For further information, see the Whole Grain Resource link listed under Additional Resources.

What is the NSLP Meal Pattern?

- A typical week equals five school operating days. SFAs that regularly operate for six or seven days must increase the weekly requirements by 20 percent for each additional day. Schools that regularly operate for less than five days must decrease the weekly requirements by 20 percent for each day less than five days.
- Calories, saturated fat, and sodium limits listed apply to the average daily amounts found in a week of reimbursable lunches. They do not apply to each individual meal or per student.
- Upon State agency Administrative Review, menus must be analyzed and must meet the current nutrient standards (find guidance in Additional Resources).
- *Trans* fat is restricted to zero grams of *trans* fat per serving.
- Potable water must be available and accessible without restriction to children at no charge in the place(s) where lunches are served during the meal service.

Reimbursable Lunch Meal:

Three creditable food components must be taken, one of which must be at least ½ cup of fruit/juice/vegetable.

Offer Versus Serve (OVS)

Schools using OVS in the NSLP must **offer five food components** (in the amounts specified in the lunch meal pattern):

- Meat/Meat Alternate
- Grain
- Fruit
- Vegetable (subgroups, covered in detail in the Menu Planning section of the Resource Guide)
- Fluid Milk (unflavored/flavored fat-free milk or unflavored low-fat milk)

To count as a reimbursable meal, the student must select at least three food components, one of which must be at least ½ cup of fruit/juice/vegetable.

- There can be multiple choices within the components.
- Selecting two foods in the same component cannot count as “two” component selections. For example, if a student were to choose ½ c banana, ½ c fruit juice, and 2 Tbsp peanut butter (2 fruit and 1 meat/meat alternate), this would not be a reimbursable meal due to it only containing 2 meal components - 1 fruit and 1 meat/meat alternate. A minimum of three (out of five) different food components must be selected.
- Entree and side item options are encouraged.
- At least two milk varieties must be offered.
- OVS allows the student to decline some components entirely.
- The menu must meet daily and weekly federal meal pattern requirements while staying within the calorie, saturated fat, and sodium dietary specifications averaged over the week.
- The SFA must ensure that the vegetable subgroups are served as per the meal pattern over the course of each week
- The menu planner decides how to credit legumes (meat/meat alternate or vegetable subgroup).

Serve (No OVS)

All five food components must be served (in the amounts specified for the age-grade group in the lunch meal pattern):

- Meat/Meat Alternate
- Grain
- Fruit
- Vegetable (subgroups, covered in detail in the Menu Planning section of the Reference Guide)
- Fluid Milk (unflavored/flavored fat-free milk or unflavored low-fat milk)

To count as a reimbursable meal, the student must take all five food components that are served. The option to select only ½ cup fruit/juice/vegetable is not allowable if OVS is not being utilized.

The menu must meet daily and weekly federal meal pattern requirements while staying within the calorie, saturated fat, and sodium dietary specifications averaged over the week.

Guidelines for the National School Lunch Program:

Meat/Meat Alternate (m/ma)

- Daily: 1 oz eq m/ma daily for age-grade groups K-8 and 2 oz eq m/ma daily for the 9-12 age-grade group.
- There is a range over the school week with a minimum number of oz eq that must be offered. This means that on some days, schools serving Grades K-5 and 6-8 must offer more than the minimum daily amount to meet the weekly minimum requirement.
- The m/ma component may be offered in a main dish or in a main dish and another food item.
- Minimum creditable serving for m/ma is 0.25 oz eq.
- Beans/peas (legumes) may be credited as either m/ma or as a vegetable. It is up to the menu planner to determine how legumes are credited each day and to note this on the Production Record. ¼ c serving = 1 oz eq m/ma
- USDA encourages schools to offer a variety of protein foods, such as lean or extra lean meats, seafood, and poultry; beans and peas; fat-free and low-fat dairy products, such as cheese and yogurt; and unsalted nuts and seeds, to meet the meat/meat alternate requirement.
- Common conversions are:
 - 1 oz eq m/ma= ¼ c dry beans and peas
2 tablespoons peanut butter
4 oz (by weight) or ½ c (volume) soy or dairy yogurt
1 oz cheese
1 oz nuts or seeds
2.2 oz (by weight) tofu containing 5 or more grams of protein
 - 2 oz eq m/ma= 1 large egg
- *The Food Buying Guide* can be helpful in determining how foods contribute. (e.g., 2 ounces of deli meat does not automatically equal 2 oz eq m/ma due to the water content). *The Food Buying Guide* link is available in Additional Resources.
- The meat/meat alternate component can be declined under OVS.

Grain

- All grains offered must be whole-grain rich products. Please visit the Additional Resources section of the guide (link at bottom of this section) for further information.
- Daily: 1 oz eq grain for age-grade groups K-8 and 2 oz eq grains daily for the 9-12 age-grade group.

- There is a range over the school week with a minimum number of oz eq that must be offered. This means that on some days, schools serving Grades K-5 and 6-8 must offer more than the minimum daily amount to meet the weekly minimum requirement.
- Minimum creditable serving for grain is 0.25 oz eq.
- Up to 2 oz eq (not two desserts per week) of grain-based desserts may be credited towards the grain component per week. For OVS, if the student selects a grain-based dessert which meets the applicable daily minimum requirement, it is creditable for this component. “Extra” dessert grain items that are not contributing to the meal components (e.g., non-whole-grain-rich crispy rice-type treat) are included in the 2 oz eq maximum/week.
- Product Formulation Statements from the foodservice vendor are needed to verify food items meet the whole grain-rich requirements. If a product formulation statement is not provided, Exhibit A must be used to determine the ounce equivalency of grain items. The item’s portion size, in grams or ounces, must be provided on the package or other supporting documentation from the manufacturer must provide this information. Templates for these formulation statements can be found in the Whole Grain Resource. Please visit the Additional Resources section of the guide (link at bottom of this section) for further information.
- Corn products treated with lime may be used to meet the whole grain-rich criteria provided that the manufacturer meets the requirements for inclusion of the Food and Drug Administration whole grain health claim and includes the claim on the product carton. If the product includes other grain ingredients, such as flour, these ingredients must be whole or enriched to meet the whole grain requirements. Grain products that are made from 100-percent whole grain corn continue to meet the WGR criteria and can be served in the School Meal Programs.
- It is very important to keep nutrition labels and/or product formulation sheets on file for grain items.
- The grain component can be declined under OVS.

Fruit

- Daily: at least ½ cup fruit must be planned for, available, and noted on the Production Record for grades K-8 and 1 cup fruit for grades 9-12.
- To qualify as a reimbursable lunch under OVS, at least ½ cup of fruit/juice (&/or vegetable) for all age-grade groups must be taken. If OVS is not used the full age-grade portion must be served.
- More fruit may be selected as long as it is counted in the nutrient analysis averaged over the week.
- For OVS purposes, if a student can select more than the minimum daily required serving of fruit (such as from a salad bar), the component is credited only once.
- Minimum creditable serving for fruits is 1/8 cup, or 2 tablespoons.
- Fruit may be offered in several different forms, including: fresh, frozen, canned in juice or light syrup, 100% juice, and dried.
- The *Food Buying Guide for Child Nutrition Programs* can be used to determine how to credit whole fruit.
- 100% juice may only meet up to one-half of the weekly fruit requirement.
- Dried fruit credits for double the amount offered (e.g., ¼ cup of raisins count as ½ cup fruit).
- Fruit may be declined under OVS *if* the student selects at least ½ c vegetable. Alternatively, the student may select ¼ cup fruit plus ¼ cup vegetable and have a reimbursable meal.
- Regardless of the age-grade group portion size that must be available, OVS requires students to select at least a ½ cup of either the fruit or the vegetable component, or a ½ cup combination of

both components (e.g., ¼ cup fruit and ¼ cup vegetable) for a reimbursable meal. In the case where a student selects both a fruit and a vegetable as two of three components selected, then the student may choose to select the ½ cup minimum of either the fruit or the vegetable, but must take the full age-grade group required portion size of the other (vegetable or fruit) component.

Vegetable

- Daily: at least ¾ c vegetable to K-8 students and at least 1 cup vegetable to 9-12 grade students must be planned for, available, and noted on the Production Record.
- To qualify as a reimbursable lunch under OVS, at least ½ c vegetable (&/or fruit/juice) for all age-grade groups must be taken. If OVS is not used the full age-grade portion must be served.
- More vegetable may be selected as long as it is counted in the nutrient analysis averaged over the week.
- The weekly minimum vegetable requirement varies by age-grade group and by vegetable subgroup and serves as a guide to help schools plan age-appropriate meals and meet dietary specifications requirements.
- For OVS purposes, if a student can select more than the minimum daily required serving of vegetable (such as from a salad bar), the component is credited only once.
- Minimum creditable serving for vegetables is 1/8 cup, or 2 tablespoons.
- Vegetables may be offered in several different forms, such as fresh, frozen, 100% juice, dried, and canned.
- Reduced-sodium canned vegetables should be purchased to help keep sodium within the dietary specifications.
- Frozen vegetables with no added salt, such green beans, carrots, corn, and peas can also be ordered.
- The vegetable component consists of a variety of 5 subgroups that must be offered over the week in specific amounts (which vary for K-8 and 9-12 age-grade groups):
 - Dark green (romaine, spinach, broccoli)
 - Red/orange (carrots, tomatoes, sweet potatoes)
 - Beans/peas/legumes (kidney beans, chickpeas)
 - Starchy (white potatoes, corn, green peas)
 - Other (cucumbers, celery, mushrooms)
 - “Other” may be met with any additional amounts from the dark green, red/orange, and beans/peas (legumes) vegetable subgroups.
- While there is no requirement that a student select each subgroup under OVS, the SFA must ensure that all students have the opportunity to select each of the vegetable subgroups over the course of a week. Find a link to a list of the vegetable subgroups under Additional Resources.
- Additional vegetables can come from any subgroup to meet the total weekly minimum requirements.
- ½ cup of mixed vegetables containing less than 2 tablespoons of vegetable subgroups can be served together to count as “additional vegetable”.
- All vegetables credit based on volume. NOTE: Raw, leafy greens credit as **half** of the volume served (e.g., 1 c romaine lettuce credits as ½ c of vegetables). Therefore, the smallest amount of creditable leafy greens would be ¼ cup as half of this would credit as 1/8 of a cup. Tomato paste and puree credit based on the volume as if reconstituted (see *The Food Buying Guide* link under Additional Resources).

- Menu planners can decide how to incorporate beans and peas (legumes) into the school meal. These foods may count toward *either* the requirement for vegetables *or* the meat/meat alternate component; schools may not offer one serving of beans and peas and count it toward both food components during the same meal, nor can they separate out beans to count as half and half.
- Some of the vegetable subgroups are not intuitive (i.e., green peas are actually considered a starchy vegetable, rather than a bean or pea) so it is helpful to refer to the list when menu planning.
- Vegetable may be declined under OVS if the student selects at least $\frac{1}{2}$ c fruit. Alternatively, the student may select $\frac{1}{4}$ cup fruit plus $\frac{1}{4}$ cup vegetable and have a reimbursable meal.
- Regardless of the age-grade group portion size that must be available, OVS requires students to select at least a $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of either the fruit or the vegetable component, or a $\frac{1}{2}$ cup combination of both components (e.g., $\frac{1}{4}$ cup fruit and $\frac{1}{4}$ cup vegetable) for a reimbursable meal. In the case where a student selects both a fruit and a vegetable as two of three components selected, then the student may choose to select the $\frac{1}{2}$ cup minimum of either the fruit or the vegetable, but must take the full age-grade group required portion size of the other (vegetable or fruit) component.

Fluid Milk

- Daily: 1 cup (8 fluid ounces) for all age/grade groups.
- Must offer at least two of the following fluid milk varieties daily:
 - Fat-free unflavored
 - Fat-free flavored
 - Low-fat (1% or less) unflavored
 - Low-fat (1% or less) or fat-free lactose-reduced/lactose-free
 - Fat-free flavored lactose-reduced /lactose-free milk
- No fat/flavor restriction on milk substitutes. The substituted product must be noted on the Production Records and be included in the nutritional analysis.
- If a school chooses to offer one or more substitutes for fluid milk for non-disabled students with medical or special dietary needs, the nondairy beverage(s) must be fortified in accordance with fortification guidelines issued by the Food and Drug Administration. A school need only offer the nondairy beverage(s) that it has identified as allowable fluid milk substitutes.
- Milk can be declined under OVS.

Smoothies

- Fluid milk used must be 1% plain, flavored nonfat, or unflavored nonfat, but it does not need to be the full 1 cup amount as long as all components are offered in the required quantities to meet meal pattern requirements.
- The volume of **pureed** fruit included in a beverage must be counted as **juice** toward the daily and weekly fruit requirements. The amount of juice offered must be limited to no more than half (50%) of the weekly fruit offerings.
 - Crediting of pureed fruit is determined on a volume as served basis. *The Food Buying Guide for Child Nutrition Programs* currently has yield information for some fruits. The USDA is in the process of adding more fruits as they update the fruit section of *The Food Buying Guide*. Currently, for other fruits, crediting is based on the volume of fruit AFTER pureeing. For example, the volume of blueberry puree may be determined by pureeing 1 cup of whole blueberries and recording the resulting amount of puree.

- Vegetables are a creditable component in smoothies. As with fruits, vegetables that are pureed into a smoothie credit as juice. Vegetables may credit toward vegetable subgroups as long as there is only one vegetable subgroup present. If a variety of vegetable subgroups are included in the recipe then the vegetables would be creditable as “additional vegetables”. If both fruit and vegetables are included in the smoothie then the puree would credit as whichever is the most predominant ingredient.
- Offering additional fruit at lunch is encouraged for variety and will allow a student that does not select a smoothie the option to select a fruit, thus helping to promote the selection of a reimbursable meal.
- Yogurt in the smoothie may be credited as a meat/meat alternate (see above under m/ma).
- For further information, see the Smoothie link listed under Additional Resources.

Production Records (see the Production Records section in the Resource Guide)

Keeping accurate and organized production records are a critical component to being a successful National School Lunch Program menu planner. Production records ensure the staff prepares the correct menu items in the correct portion sizes to fit the required meal pattern. Production records also provide a record that reimbursable meals were served, which is very important proof of meal pattern compliance for State agency Administrative Reviews. A lack of production records or incomplete production records may result in the school not receiving reimbursement for the meals, if there is not proof that reimbursable meals were served.

Reimbursable Meals Signage

Students, servers, and cashiers must be able to identify what constitutes a reimbursable meal. Schools using OVS must also identify what a student must select in order to have a reimbursable meal (i.e., signage located in the cafeteria, preferably at or near the beginning of the serving line, explaining what constitutes a reimbursable meal to students, including the requirement to select at least ½ cup fruit or vegetable, accomplishes this). “What’s for Lunch” posters are available through the State Department of Education.

Why is the National School Lunch Program Important?

The NSLP gives meal access to children who may not be able to afford a well-balanced, nutritious meal. Nutritious meals give students energy needed to continue learning, helping them achieve school success, and improving health. Healthy students have fewer days of missed school and improved student attitudes; they are more attentive and well-behaved, which further enhances learning.

Resources

Additional resources may be available for this topic. Please check the Idaho School Nutrition Reference Guide website for copies of manuals, user guides and helpful links to relevant subject matter.